



Eminent Domain Abuse: City of SeaTac plans to take family business

by Trent England

Meet the new sister cities of eminent domain abuse: New London, Connecticut, and SeaTac, Washington. Separated by almost 3,000 miles, these cities stand side-by-side when it comes to government abusing its power to take private property.

In 2001, the pharmaceutical giant Pfizer opened a corporate office in the City of New London. The City's government-sponsored development corporation hoped to entice Pfizer to create a much larger facility. It used the power of eminent domain to take the homes of Suzette Kelo and her neighbors to free up the land for the City's Pfizer-centered vision.

Late last year, Pfizer announced that it will close all its New London offices by 2011. Suzette Kelo's neighborhood remains a wasteland—the homes were bulldozed after the Supreme Court of the United States, in a 5-4 decision, sided with the City.

Despite the public outcry against New London, SeaTac has decided to follow its lead.

James and Doris Cassan have operated Park and Fly, a valet and self-park facility that serves travelers at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, since the 1960s. Their family business is located on International Boulevard, just across from the airport in an area dominated by hotels and other parking facilities.

The Cassans worked hard and slowly purchased more and more of the property that they originally leased for their business. They carefully grew their business, eventually employing more than 40 people as part of their staff “family.”

When Sound Transit used eminent domain—not once, but *twice*—to carve out pieces of the Park and Fly property for a light rail station, the Cassans reluctantly complied.

Now the City of SeaTac has decided to use eminent domain to take over the entire property to make way for a massive, expensive, and uncertain redevelopment scheme.

SeaTac has been careful in its public statements to insist that it will only use the confiscated property for a “public purpose.” City officials have even claimed that they need to take Park and Fly so that they can transform the private parking facility into a public parking facility. Yet emails between staff at the Port of Seattle and the City reveal an understanding that the Port wants less parking, not more, near its own airport parking garages.

Public-records requests by the Cassan's daughter, Traci, have also exposed that SeaTac may resell much of the property in their planned redevelopment area to “developer(s) capable of implementing the City's vision.” Notes from a meeting with the city attorney record the following strategic advice: “conversation w/ Cassan – mention public uses in a general fashion.”

Other documents reveal the city's opportunism. When government takes property, it is required to pay “just compensation.” Yet in the midst of the real estate downturn, that compensation will be much less than the Cassan's own investment. And of course, if things turn around, the City will reap a windfall at the expense of the Cassan family. A City Council executive session presentation calls this a “potentially advantageous cost environment.”

SeaTac officials have a grand vision for their City's future. Like the planners and development experts in New London, SeaTac has decided that private property owners are a hindrance to be swept aside in pursuit of bigger, fancier buildings and increased tax revenues.

Today, New London's redevelopment plans are a shambles. The property taken from private citizens remains a wasteland. Politicians and officials involved in that taking are reviled. **Even so, the City of SeaTac is now eagerly following New London's path.**

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